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Suddenly Sexy: Creative Nonfiction Rear-ends Composition

Wendy Bishop

The desire to make sense of what we see and do does not suddenly come upon us in midlife. I have always believed that students appreciate the chance to write about their lives and interests—and the regular opportunity to read these accounts has literally kept me teaching composition.

Thomas Newkirk (39)

Writing is a way of discovering what you don't already know, of clarifying what you don't understand, of preserving what you value, and of sharing your discoveries with other people.

Scott Russell Sanders (Root 129)

The personal essay is built on an individual's thoughtful, unhurried reflection on certain experiences that seem to have an interesting significance, and upon the development of a prose style that makes possible the projection of the quality of mind of the person setting out those reflections. It is precisely not the kind of essay likely to be produced by an assignment—due in a week—to a class of undergraduates unaccustomed to leisurely reflection on anything.

Wendell Harris (939)

My seventeen-year-old daughter has just had the fifth automotive accident of her first twenty months of driving, the damage generously spread across three family vehicles. Only three of the five accidents are direct results of her decisions, but all remain the result of her world-interactions nonetheless. First, driving my husband's car, Morgan does not see the car *before* the car ahead of her stop for a turn, so she plows into that nearer car when it brakes sharply. Next, she parks my truck at the fairgrounds one night; in the morning, one side appears mys-

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teriously to have been backed into. *It is not known how this happened.* In a bid to save our wheels, we purchase Morgan a car that she rolls gently into another while reversing in a post office parking lot. Subsequently, she begins to back out of a girlfriend's driveway but pauses halfway down, and her girlfriend, following fast in her own car, collides with my daughter's car: a backwards, rear-and-front-end collision. Finally, the day before we are due at the repair shop to fix the two musketeers' driveway dents, at a stop sign at the bottom of the hill below our house, my daughter looks left, then right, then pulls out into the main road in front of a speedy new SUV that has by now materialized on her left.

Air bags—insurance adjustors—right-of-way ticket—hourly-wage-earned-and-newly-installed CD player for naught—we're approaching the collision center, again. Morgan has developed a vehicular history. She is going to traffic school. She is back where she started, borrowing the truck if I'll loan it, waiting for the prognosis on her once-bright-silver-and-still-beloved Honda. She is under constant revision. Four months from "adult" status, a year from college (though enrolled for AP English 101), Morgan could be viewed as a callow youth or as a young adult, building her life day by day, however unluckily.

Viewing her merely as a callow youth, we might critique and chastise; she would become furtive, defiant, and locked into a "to hell with it" mindset. How familiar does this sound?

While current writing instruction pays lip service to student writing as a legitimate form of discourse, our research and scholarship assumes that student writing, especially that of first-year writers, is either a) "uninitiated," which implies a need for rules and insider information; b) "inexperienced," which implies that time, practice, and apprenticeship are mostly the answer to writing problems; or c) "juvenilia," which assumes that immature students become masterful students when they are older and have more to say. (Mirtz 193)

That is, I can be frustrated, angry, stern, and tired. I can see my daughter as uninitiated, inexperienced, and juvenile. I may lecture her about safer driving, drive with her for another practice year (my foot pumping the imaginary, passenger-side brake pedal), and wait for her to "grow up," hoping I'll hear a contrite apology some day (most likely, if ever, when she is raising her own teenagers).

Or I can view her as a young adult and accept that this is what our car insurance is for; this is what the patient police officer who issued her ticket (and the fire, ambulance, and EMT personnel) sees happening far too regularly but copes with as "part of the job"; this is what traffic school is designed for; this is what she has to process herself (remember the sound of your own car crashes, metal on metal nightmares that never quite go away?). That is, I can view Morgan as Thomas Newkirk views his students in the quotation that opens this essay, as an individual with an insistent need to make meaning of her life as it is unfolding and as an individual who will

evolve, rather than as an individual who should wait until she is forty or fifty before I deem her able to understand the events of her young adulthood.

We all know it's nearly impossible to be found acceptable as teachers by our own children, but if I were able, I might encourage this learner to question her series of accidents, to investigate her beliefs, to ask why—despite evidence provided in traffic safety school and newspapers—the culture of her high school insists that seatbelts don't help much, in fact even kill (urban legends?), thereby justifying her and her friends' desires not to obey state laws. If I feel that such reflection is called for now, and continuously through her life, I'll do all I can to limit the damage, to discuss, to educate, to nurture. But I have to assume that a young adult, four months shy of her eighteenth birthday, needs—as Scott Russell Sanders puts it—to discover what she doesn't know, clarify what she doesn't understand, preserve what she values, and share her discoveries with others, for it is she who hopes to drive again, and will.



My daughter's story allows me to see the potential for making provocative connections between the writing, teaching, and learning of creative nonfiction and the composition essay. These days, the former seems to be crashing into the latter, though not necessarily in a tragic way. Nonfiction has long held promise for improving our thinking about composition—first-year through graduate levels—yet viewing these areas of reading and writing productively *together* has been a hard sell in composition circles. The reverse is true also, but my primary focus at this time is to enrich my thinking about composition instruction. Because nonfiction is currently generating a great deal of discussion, we could view it fearfully as rear-ending us, or side-swiping us, or causing us to swerve and hydroplane and straighten our course again, determined to leave it in the rear-view mirror. My metaphor breaks down at this point. Simply, I think there's a real chance right now for letting the possibilities of creative nonfiction infuse, improve, and invigorate the teaching of composition. If this fourth genre, as a journal devoted to creative nonfiction calls itself, if the “other” literature, as W. Ross Winterowd has called it, if nonfiction prose is really the formative genre of our field, what does it mean to see it anew?



Several years ago, a graduate student in composition and rhetoric in my English department wanted to add literary nonfiction (both readings in and theories of) as a minor area of his degree study. My English department grants the English Ph.D. with an emphasis in literature, composition and rhetoric, or creative writing. However, to date, we have no designated courses in creative nonfiction, nor is nonfiction a listed minor area of study. We teach nonfiction writing under a rubric of article- and essay-writing courses, sophomore through graduate levels, which may be individually focused by the teacher who covers each section. These courses are assigned the same ENC prefix that identifies the first-year composition sequence

and that separates such courses from the CRW prefix, which identifies poetry, fiction, and drama courses.

When this candidate in composition took his reading list and request to the graduate committee, I was unprepared for the vehemence of the discussion that ensued. Suddenly, everyone had an interest in literary or creative nonfiction and no one agreed on what this candidate's reading list should cover and what theorists should be called upon. Equally suspicious seemed to be this candidate's motives: what were those of us in composition *really* up to in proposing such a minor area in the first place? Wasn't nonfiction the studio domain of creative writers or the scholarly domain of literary critics and, no matter what, certainly somehow distinct from the profession of composition? When informed by the graduate committee that I could tell the candidate his reading area would be approved, I was also informed that this was a one-time-only decision, undertaken for this student; I wasn't to expect that this area of study, this reading list, this minor, was a settled issue.

And clearly it is not. Not *within* the field of English studies. Notice for instance how my opening quotations diverge as they present the observations of a compositionist, a creative writer, and a literary scholar. In her defense of the memoir, Jocelyn Bartkevicius suggests that critiques of nonfiction, particularly of the memoir, could be considered representative of a fear of nonfiction that permeates an academy that has preferred to focus on poetry, fiction, and drama as its genres of currency:

Nor is the criticism of the genre new. Near the turn of the last century, readers encountered such articles as 'The Decline of the Memoir,' 'Musing without Method: Commonplace Memoirs,' and Virginia Woolf's 'The Decay of Essay Writing.' But criticism itself suggests vitality, and whereas a writer like Virginia Woolf selectively measures particular unsuccessful techniques against successful life writing, many contemporary critics use the appearance of one bad book to condemn the entire genre. In so doing, they hold memoirs to a different standard than other literary works; it is a rare reviewer who, in panning a poorly written novel, condemns the entire genre of fiction. (135)

An example of genre-fear can be found in the popular *and* scholarly reaction to Katherine Harrison's incest memoir *The Kiss*, which generated as much discussion about Harrison herself as about the quality of her writing: "In criticizing the lives and ignoring the writing, critics cease functioning as book reviewers and literary critics and become apologists of convention and mainstream morality" suggests Bartkevicius (139).

Many seem to fear the messy and difficult-to-define genre(s) of nonfiction, dominated by the commodious literary essay that allows writers to play with rheostat-like graduations of personal (author-saturated) and scholarly (author-evacuated) prose. In addition, we talk of creative nonfiction as program, genre, and pedagogy,

all three uses deployed across a shifting matrix of institutional, textual, and communal contexts. To aid discussion here, I conflate several forms into that most portable of terms, *the essay*, as synecdoche for the commonly taught subgenres of creative nonfiction: “personal essays, memoirs, autobiographies, new journalism, and certain traditions of travel writing, environmental writing, profiles, and so on” (Hesse, “Who Owns” 251).

Overall, commentators on and historians in this area tend to define creative nonfiction by affirming those sorts of essays they like and approve of and by excluding many sorts of essayistic writing by negation. However, saying what the essay is not appears to help the critic more than the student. Limited positive definition and wide-ranging negative definition are discourse moves that camouflage the critics’ aesthetic biases. For example, after cordoning off almost all sorts of writing except what he is considering the “truly personal essay,” Wendell Harris leaves the writer, and the student of writing, almost no territory to ply:

The personal essay does not have as its primary goal the presentation of facts, instruction in how to do anything, the making of recommendations about how to handle a current problem, the judicial evaluation of anything, the construction of an argument for any theory, or the inculcation of moral rules. Neither is it primarily satirical or humorous. The reader may well find the author’s point of view in some way useful, but the immediate effect of the successful personal essay is simply the consciousness of participating in an individual way of looking at things, of savoring the striking or pungent phrasing that gives force to the author’s individual point of view, or of pursuing fresh thoughts of one’s own for which the unique mental organization of the author has somehow been a catalyst. (936)

I’m reminded of Jane Tompkins’s claim that the primary criterion of literature in the twentieth century was that it “do nothing” (210), a goal we see reflected in Harris’s definition. Those who defend the literary essay valorize this aesthetic and appear to fear the upstart, moneygrubbing, workaday essay, or any essay that has creative *and* practical aims (journalistic, travel, suasive, and so on).



So too, some composition specialists fear the incursions into their courses of just this sort of artistic personal essay and the demands teaching essay writing might make on an overcrowded curriculum. “Focusing exclusively on the essay—including the critical essay on a work of literature—amounts to collapsing the discourses of the academy into one genre, limiting students’ abilities to practice other forms, experience other perspectives, negotiate the expectations of other readers,” warns Erika Lindemann in 1993 (312). In her debate essay “Freshman Composition: No Place for Literature” Lindemann seems rightly worried about the degree to which “talk about” literature might displace the practices of learning to write. But she also urges us to reserve the first-year course *exclusively* for an induction into academic

discourses. To achieve the space for such instruction, Lindemann argues against a literary content for the required first-year sequence, an argument she refines two years later in “Three Views of English 101,” in which process courses are assumed to focus solely on self-discovery whereas the “writing as a system” course “reflects efforts to consolidate our understanding of how people write in contexts outside English 101” (295).

In fact, Lindemann and her original debate partner, Gary Tate, “agreed in [a] phone call to define literature as poetry, fiction, and drama” (Lindemann, “Personal”), a fact picked up on by a respondent to Lindemann’s first essay, who queries: “I would want to ask at least one question: exactly what kind of writing is nonimaginative, nonliterary? I would also urge that we expand our definition of literature to include more than poetry, fiction, and drama” (Crain 678). Writing in 1996, Wendell Harris, in the quotation that opens this essay, argues that first-year writers can’t reflect enough to create literature. For very different reasons, both Lindemann and Harris, at this time—the early to mid-1990s—suggest that first-year writers are not potential producers of literature and/or that to produce creative, literary essays is no longer a defensible focus, or pedagogical challenge, for the first-year course. Both are assumptions I would challenge (see Bishop).

Should we be teaching literary nonfiction within composition courses? This discussion generally focuses on the personal essay or on “how writing in these genres is useful as a means rather than an end” (Hesse, “Who Owns” 253) in the composition classroom. The associated question, “Should we be teaching nonfiction (and if so what sort of nonfiction) in English departments?” is also murky within programs like mine, where I regularly hear that we need to hire a faculty member specializing in creative nonfiction. My sotto-voiced suggestion that such a hire be undertaken jointly with composition receives a blank stare. Clearly, there is a deep historical and institutional fissure between the courses designated CRW and ENC that we have long lived with. As recently as two years ago, I taught a graduate article and essay workshop subtitled “Lifewriting” that included attention to autobiography, memoir, and personal narratives. During the same term, the director of creative writing was scheduled for a graduate article and essay workshop focused on nonfiction—on the more formally organized sorts of articles and essays, which, as he put it, did *not* touch on the personal. Sharing notes with this professor after the term, I explained how energized I had been, writing with my students and exploring alternate styles of nonfiction essays. He said that his course had been one of the worst teaching experiences of his career, particularly because he couldn’t stop the students from undertaking first-person writing, and that he could hardly wait until the program managed to argue for a tenure-line hire in creative nonfiction because he, a fiction writer, never intended to offer nonfiction again.

Possibly by accident, these courses had been scheduled in a way that forced

enrolling students, seemingly, to choose between the personal and the impersonal. Instead of being involved in an institutional dialogue that might have enlarged the department's curriculum, my colleague and I were set up to champion competing pedagogies, and graduate students I spoke with mused over these programmatic signals even if the faculty at large did not. Certainly my program is not the only one to find *rapprochement* difficult. At the end of a long and to my mind conservative exploration about what he has seen students accomplish or fail to accomplish in their essays, Gordon Harvey manages to argue for a both/and approach to instruction *only* in the final paragraph of "Presence in the Essay." At the last possible moment, he challenges the prevailing, dichotomized thinking of heart-based versus head-based essays, claiming, "It won't be easy to teach freshmen to write with presence. It will be impossible, however, as long as our language for discussing essays splits apart personal experience from intellectual" (650). Better to make the turn at the last possible moment than not at all. And if so, perhaps there is hope after all for drivers of these textual vehicles.



As a writer of poetry and short stories turned compositionist, who has herself added advanced composition and creative nonfiction to her teaching and writing repertoires, my experiences suggest that English departments continue to divide and complicate the curriculum without undertaking necessary and possibly enriching discussions. Gerald Graff demonstrates how English studies avoids integrating new areas, while Terry Eagleton, Robert Scholes, and Stephen North and his colleagues suggest new organizational visions. Robert Connors describes the history of secession, as varieties of composition—general, business, journalistic—left the fold and reviews the way composition studies bracketed the composing process into modal entities. In the 1990s, creative writers turned toward nonfiction while those in composition left the study of stylistics, coherence, and cohesion to investigate disciplinary writing and cultural studies. It is more than a decade since craft—a word used regularly in creative writing and rarely in composition—and style have been discussed with intense interest. Erika Lindemann's debate partner, Gary Tate, bemoans the fact that "'Imagination,' for example, sounds as antique today as another word we lost: 'Style'" (318), and Robert Connors queries the current absence of discussions of sentence stylistics in "The Erasure of the Sentence." It is a rare moment—generally marked by the boundaries of a special issue—when creative writing *pedagogy* is highlighted in a scholarly journal (see Green; Harris; and Ritter) although discussion concerning creative nonfiction is on the rise overall.

Perhaps creative nonfiction is getting new play in English departments because workshop-oriented compositionists, in our move to focus on the content and thinking in student essays, have too long now turned our attention away from the teaching of aspects of craft. This lack is being addressed by the increasing number of

MFA-credentialed teachers of first-year writing (some of whom eventually undertake doctoral degrees in composition with the goal of putting both sorts of training in the service of better instruction). These teachers are part of a generation that has been required to mix practice with theory and that feels encouraged to write in more than one genre. Members of my creative writing student generation of the 1970s and 1980s, on the other hand, were encouraged to focus on a single genre at the risk of being thought unserious if we didn't. Fiscal realities in creative writing are also leading writers toward this less populated and more marketable genre (see Hesse, "Essays," "Who Owns"; Ritter). Literary journals highlight nonfiction; book-manuscript contests roll around more regularly; most MFA programs are adding courses and faculty in this genre; and the stigma against "writing that makes money" appears to be diminishing within in the U.S. university system, perhaps because that system is being moved toward corporate thinking and organization, like it or not (see Green). Write a successful memoir like Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted* as an English department member in the 1980s and this seemingly "minor" accomplishment would have been mentioned patronizingly, if at all, during tenuring discussions. Do the same and be optioned for a film in the 2000s, and you'll accrue praise, cash, envy, and a promotion.

In any event, most English academics highlight their tenure-qualifying creative and scholarly work and neglect to mention how often they also compose within a range of nonfiction genres, including the memo, the annual review statement, the recommendation, the grant application, and the teaching essay. Some fight this proliferation of textual demands. Some see it as enriching, turn to essay writing and nonfiction with new interest, and have begun to bring it more willingly to their academic table. A special section of the September 2001 issue of *College English* devoted to examining the personal in scholarly writing commences in this way: "Any academic even vaguely aware of current trends in scholarship has noted the preeminence of 'the personal' in the last few years" (Hindman 34). Literary critics who have been toying with academic prose for some years now have become more invested in nonfiction (memoir, literacy narrative, autobiography). We can find compelling instances of the academic novel (David Lodge and others) and memoir and metapedagogical inventory (Jane Tompkins and others). There are expressions of senioritis—a marked interest in developing an elegant or informal or literary critical prose style (G. Douglas Atkins and others)—although certainly some colleagues find this habit distasteful. Gordon Harvey, for instance, critiques the very move that Atkins confesses to in the same issue of *College English*; Jane Tompkins has been reviled *and* celebrated for her commitment to developing a personal scholarly voice; and others find that the act of seeking "presence" in their essays provides them with an academic second wind. "Having had my writing on theory once or twice praised for its clarity and even ease of expression—what I've struggled all my life to achieve—

I had begun, at long last, in mid-life, to love sentences, glorying in those I read in various genres and working hard to make some ‘comely and muscular’ (Ozick 109) ones of my own,” explains G. Douglas Atkins (635).

Those of us who (re)turn to the literatures of fact do so not to avoid investigations of discourse and community. Rather, we find nonfiction prose the appropriate investigative vehicle. Paul Heilker explains his own turn toward the essay this way:

In stark contrast to this perspective [taken by the thesis/support writer], however, it has been my experience that the ‘truths’ in each of the various spheres of my life (emotional, spiritual, familial, intellectual, professional, political, and so on) have been anything but ‘certain,’ especially in the innumerable areas where these spheres intersect and conflict [. . .]embroiled in continual disagreement and contradiction, defying all my attempts to pin it down and thus settle the matter once and for all, no matter how scrupulously I examine or try to articulate the matter at hand. (5)

Trying to work toward emotional, spiritual, familial, intellectual, professional, political, and the big ETC. of truths is not just part of, but is the process of writing, of composing nonfiction. It is the golden mean, too, of a version of academic life that many of us might choose.



When creative nonfiction collides with composition, how does the popularity of this genre affect our courses? Is it suddenly sexy to be teaching nonfiction because, like Everest, it’s there, or does the genre need us and we teachers of writing, composition in particular, need the genre? A case might be made for both the former and the latter. Creative writers have not wanted much to do with composition, and the distance between the two “instructions” can more easily be understood by looking at textbooks. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, composition instruction is as much about “what’s left” as it is about being a theorized and energized profession. The work of historians like James Berlin and Robert Connors suggests that within the rich world of essay writing claimed by its historians, the teaching of the essay in composition is ours by default. In fact, we have before us more of what has been abandoned (i.e., deemed not worth fighting over) than we do of what has been deemed desirable. So, while Joyce Bartkevicius suggests an additive lineage—“In tracing the personal essay back to Montaigne and the ancient Greek orators, Virginia Woolf notes in ‘The Decay of Essay Writing’ that paradoxically, while the personal essay is one of our most ancient forms, it is also one of our most modern” (137)—Robert Connors offers a subtractive history: “Exposition and argument quickly were accepted by teachers as the most important modes, as can be seen in the organization of many [composition] texts—with the ‘vowel modes’ given much more space than the ‘consonant modes’” (*Composition* 318).

Exposition and argument were left to us, not narration and description, which were ceded to creative writing. And much of our instructional effort was grounded

in further subtractions as we lost or abandoned business writing, reporting, technical writing. Containment and teachability resulted in an eviscerated type of essay, not personal writing (too easy, too dangerous), not professional writing (too challenging), but school writing and research papers:

The rise of the “research paper” as a genre in freshman composition is another way teachers tried to transcend the personal writing that occupied the early stages of any course. Library research—often unconnected to any writing purpose other than amassing brute facts for regurgitation into a “research” paper—became very popular around 1920 and has remained a staple in writing courses since. (Connors, *Composition* 321)

Modal rhetorics gave way to process rhetorics. Process-oriented textbooks, burdened as they are with the ghosts of the modes, have never really matured. Weighted down by the homogenization required for “program adoption,” textbook change is glacial to begin with, and process-oriented texts were soon outflanked by cultural studies-oriented texts with their canon of readings that might well suggest, once again, that the consumption of texts is overtaking the production of texts as our classroom focus. Nevertheless, while composition textbooks could be—and often are—roundly critiqued, they did and do try to guide writing students to drive *somewhere*. Currently, many offer help with inventing and developing topics; provide advice on solo and collaborative authoring; encourage students to investigate literacy defined broadly; suggest the criteria for and values of workplace writing; explain classical and offer new rhetorical approaches by exploring audience and voice; encourage and illustrate revision principles; and offer usage guidelines and language discussions.

In these efforts, our field, our teachers, our texts, contribute sound composing values and develop classroom conditions for students that parallel those desired by practicing essayists as described by Scott Russell Sanders in the quotation that opens this essay. Essayists seek to discover, clarify, preserve, value, and share. Oddly, it seems to me these aims are not well transmitted in recent textbooks of creative nonfiction, which provide little in the way of a theoretical vocabulary for discussing the genre (not the “point of view” of fiction or the “rhetorical situation” of composition or the “circulation and production of knowledge” of literary theory). Chapter topics like “put yourself on the line” or “the elusive truth” or “big ideas” suggest the sketchy nature of the terrain the student is about to encounter. And this confusion plays out in journals when we consider genre definitions offered by *Creative Nonfiction* (www.creativenonfiction.org) by way of the creative writing wing of the academy, which aims to *discipline* the genre, and *Fourth Genre* (www.msupress.msu.edu) by way of—or at least with the support of—a composition perspective, which opens the genre to further exploration. Both impulses are understandable and necessary; both are undertheorized and underdiscussed.

In textbooks, in classrooms, in departments, across the writing area subsections of our broad discipline of English studies, it seems as though a pooling of knowledges, a comparison of terms, a development of strategies might be in order. “Who owns creative nonfiction?” asks Douglas Hesse in an essay titled with the same question. His answer: “At some level it really doesn’t matter, as long as whoever claims it isn’t selfish” (261). Others, too, are urging this sort of genre-generosity and cross-fertilization. “Somehow the rigor and complexity and the analytical subtlety that bind the familiar and the academic forms of the essay often escape us because so much is out of sight,” explains Pat Hoy:

Students imagine that the familiar essay is too easy, that the academic is nothing but claim and proof. Faculty consider the familiar trivial and the academic profound. *What we see is only part of what we can get.* But acting more like armed warriors than rhetorical seers, we writing teachers often miss the opportunity to steal out of our tents during the night and cross the battle lines in search of hidden delights. We miss the opportunity to hawk our wares—sometimes we know too little about what we’re selling. (353; emphasis added)

If coordinated rethinking of these issues could take place, my department’s graduate committee might feel less inclined to approve each reading list on a case-by-case basis. My colleague and I might not design courses that cut off pieces of the essayistic pie, to be eaten alone in separate corners. Our students might be better prepared to investigate the questions they ask: What is creative nonfiction (and how does it circulate)? How do essays, memoirs, and the writing of place compare? What is the relation of fact to fiction in writing? And so on.



Personal journalism, the varied literatures of fact, and many of the forms of the essay are meditative, offering not certainties or unities but attempts that may provoke or support a reader’s thoughts. “It is only through our journeys out of suffering into pleasure that each of us can become a self,” claims Kurt Spellmeyer; and later in his essay “After Theory,” he remarks that “when our words do their proper work by making the world more fully present to us, they disappear below the surface of consciousness, and their disappearance indicates that we have moved beyond our isolation” (908, 910). To move beyond isolation is the writer’s constant goal. Spellmeyer argues that we need “to become ethnographers of experience” (911). I argue that we all need to essay our lives. In doing so, we never arrive at the end of things but agree to linger thoughtfully, painfully, ecstatically, along the way, in the company of others, in the agency of our words.

Why has such a stance been viewed as problematic in the writing classroom? Wendell Harris makes the literary scholar’s case that our students can’t possibly be assigned essays with the expectation that they produce good writing, in classes, under institutional conditions. I happen not to agree. While concerned with the study

of the social construction of genres, I also value the flexibility of the essay in all its permutations and respect its ability to absorb a variety of political and artistic commitments. Such an ability should also meet the needs of classroom authors who inhabit environments where imagination is often mediated by technology. I've read very moving and very proficient student writing interwoven with the necessary false starts and dead ends that any pedagogy, or life in writing, engenders. Harris's high-art position is one that gets underlined tacitly by those in the literary wings of our business. I'm not railing against this anymore—that does as much use as arguing for buckling up a seat belt—but I am pointing out that the elitist position always undercuts our work and undermines our ability to create belief-based instruction.

When the composition instructor, who is remarkably overburdened and underappreciated in our nation's colleges and universities, discusses first-year writing students, she or he is tempted by overwork to do so from a one-up, adult-to-child stance, as outlined in the observations by Ruth Mirtz shared earlier. We've all read the tired or predictable first-year theme, the canned research paper, the teacher-pleasing or exam-worthy five-star in-class writing. We've read so many, in fact, that it's easy to assume that first-year students can't write essays that engage their almost exclusively teacher-reader audience because they don't have the skills to write well, they aren't yet members of the academic discourse community, or they're plain too young to have had experiences about which to reflect that could possibly interest their older instructors.

Thomas Newkirk argues a different position, that we should consider our students as having experiences well worth pondering and plundering in their prose. That we don't see students as authors says more about us as teachers, I believe, than it says about students as thinkers. "The great strain of college writing is to appear much older and wiser, to assume a wisdom and judiciousness that seems wildly beyond the reach of an eighteen-year-old" (82). Newkirk makes his claims via a pedagogy that includes careful attention to student writing, "By reading sentences like this one against the grain, I try to imagine a context in which it can be significant and meaningful—even admirable" (10). Newkirk's pedagogical position relies on belief. Belief is an issue raised early in our field by Peter Elbow and dismissed rather quickly, because we have not yet found a systematic way to institute a proactive, belief-oriented composition pedagogy, something that paying attention to the value and potential of nonfiction might help us to do.

We don't have to go very far to believe—to find the potential in student writing that is there, as yet unactivated—if we rethink our attitudes, expecting to find the familiar profound, traveling farther than we can currently see, reading and writing against the grain, imagining student writing into its actual significance. Or as Pat Hoy suggests, understanding that, so far, "what we see is only part of what we can get." In his discussion of the writer in the academy, Scott Russell Sanders shares this

Flannery O'Connor quotation: "The fact is that anybody who has survived his childhood has enough information about life to last him the rest of his days. If you can't make something out of a little experience, you probably won't be able to make it out of a lot. The writer's business is to contemplate experience, not to be merged in it" (106). Sanders believes "our task is not to collect experiences like trophies but, rather, to be one on whom no experience—no matter how circumscribed—is lost. But I disagree with this celebrated claim [O'Connor's] that childhood provides us with enough information to last us the rest of our days," says Sanders. "A literature that limits itself to the trials and tribulations of growing up will never be grown up" (106). In making this assertion, Sanders provides a metaphor for our writing classes, they are sites of growth and staging areas for *maturing* thinking. Because life is difficult to pin down yet still yields insights when we examine it, I believe student writers, like their teachers, continue to find creative nonfiction, particularly the personal essay, a valuable speculative instrument.

As I argue for cooperation and belief—that those in composition and creative writing who care about student writers and nonfiction prose pool their knowledge, develop new pedagogies, create fresh possibilities—I need to look at some of the concerns that have slowed such developments, a major one being that undergraduate writers have little in the way of experience to share. How do we help them, as Sanders would have it, grow up in their writing, but not, as Newkirk observes we often do, by stampeding them into sounding old before their time?



First, we must believe they can write. Fiction. Fact. Personal. Scholarly. The Works. And that these aspects of crafting prose are worth discussing and teaching to students. If story supports essay and if some essays function as story (Hesse, "Essays" 198), student writers need to understand the uses of narrative for all their aims, including those of exposition and scholarship. Second, we must believe that narrative thinking is valuable. "I use the terms 'personal writing' and 'personal narrative' interchangeably to refer to the ways in which writers make sense of their lives by organizing their experience into first-person stories," claims Candace Spigelman:

Such stories may be expressed in a single sentence or as a lengthy chronological account, but in all cases, their telling is purposeful; they are intended to serve ends beyond pure expression of opinion or cathartic confession. Moreover, whether that purpose is scholarly, political, or aesthetic, neither the veracity of the experience nor the authenticity of the writer's emotions is relevant criteria for assessing the text's achievement. (66)

Like Spigelman, we can give this genre the attention we have given other genres, developing methods for response to, evaluation of, and instruction in this arena. For instance, Dana Elder offers one of what I believe are many possible pedagogical avenues. Elder reviews the two major complaints teachers express concerning stu-

dents' personal essays; one, that the emphasis in such essays is on "personal" to the loss of "essay," with the related assumption that this means writing heavy on confession and light on reflection. If students do write personal essays, he explains, teachers find they're as likely as not to substitute a tagged-on "moral" rather than incorporate the reflective qualities many readers look to find in the essay (425–26). Elder proposes that students be taught to "write in classical civic discourse forms which enfranchise the personal in the service of the community, thereby including both the expressive and the transactional" (426). This is a route worth investigating. But I point out that the continued fears of chaos and confusion expressed by writing teachers and critics of personal writing in (required) writing courses suggest the degree to which we have been socialized into the institutions we serve. We need to ask ourselves how complicit we are, and want to be, in creating the academy's "good citizen." Newkirk suggests that we need to interrogate our own motives: "This ambivalence about the appropriateness of emotion reflects an academic and class bias that schools seek to pass on to students. [. . .] Students, positioned between the academic and wider culture, have to puzzle out the place of emotion and sentiment in their writing" (26). Student writers are creating places to stand, negotiated cultural identities with which to approach and understand their worlds. "Students widen their living perspective through the widening of their language perspective," claims Judith Harris (183).

I know that many of us who work with composition students hope to create authors who *care* to write in the required first-year class and who will continue to value writing—lifelong. Therefore, as a teacher, I'm eager to facilitate the seeking of writable experience. To do this, I can focus on life-history research (asking students to research world events from the day they were born); design a course that focuses on community and place (asking students to research a local organization; to research their neighborhood, city, and/or region, and work outward from that location); teach practices of ethnographic attention, including participant-observation within a local culture which the writer has rarely approached previously. I can encourage the reflection on experience through writing that undergirds all cultural critique; as writers ask where they stand in relation to others in the world, they become participants *and* spectators. In "Reflections on the Peculiar Status of the Personal Essay," Wendell Harris suggests that exercises like these cannot create fine essays or essayists, or truly personal essays, which seem to have to well up from within like an oil strike. I disagree. I believe in instruction. I believe assignments can be structured and sequenced so learners improve their ability to remember, to observe, to reflect, to analyze, and to write. I don't agree that sequenced activities and exercises should be dismissed as inauthentic: perhaps they feel so for the practicing writer or scholarly reader who has already internalized these habits. Nevertheless, exercises provide sound learning experiences for student writers, particularly if the

results of such work are studied, theorized, and revised and if we believe that our students are authors.

Studied, theorized, and revised because, of course, we have to interrogate the soundness of our assignments. In doing this, no one gets off easily. As he continues his essay, Harris explains that he was surprised to learn that his students don't understand that essays are enjoyable to write and to read or that the essay is an occasion for pleasure (943). Perhaps his own strict definition has limited the genre's appeal. Or perhaps his students' lack of citizenship in "the community of the essay" proves a problem. When writers are not shareholders in the composing enterprise, they disengage, as Gordon Harvey points out.

One reason student essays on texts, including the essays I've mentioned, sound like exercises is that the writers haven't defined (for themselves or for the reader) what they found interesting enough to pursue and why it should interest a real person (besides their instructor): why it isn't simply obvious, why there's a mystery to unfold, how the matter is different from one might expect or some have said—why an essay needs writing. (650)

How do we teach the pleasures of essay writing and the civic possibilities of prose literatures? How do we create courses that allow writers to define interesting topics of reflection, and how do we create classroom cultures within which the essay needs to be written? We treat the student essayist as we treat ourselves, as essayists and authors of creative nonfiction.

In arguing for the essay as a democratic form, Chris Anderson insists that it is also an appropriate form for students. "The essay is not genteel and too sophisticated," he says; "students can and do imitate it. I see essayistic power and style all the time in the writing of students, at all levels of ability. In fact, the essay seems more appropriate for beginning and struggling writers than anything else because it gives such students permission to dramatize the process of their thinking" (88). I'm not the first to suggest that although the move in literary and composition circles has been toward scholarly essays of personal voice, essays that demonstrate "presence," and even essays of personal disclosure, the same textual rights have not been comfortably extended to our students on a regular basis (see Bloom, "Why Don't"). Textbooks and curriculum, especially in first-year programs, are conservative, regularizing rather than destabilizing. If we look to discourse communities we do so "for the students' own good," so they know how to achieve, fit in, succeed within preexisting communities. In such assumptions, I hear the echo of my Army father's "Do what I say, not what I do."

Peter Elbow suggests that when academics were steeped in objective certainty, they felt, somehow, more free to write informally, but that the more language change occurs—as the vernacular overtakes us—and the more we see knowledge as contingent, the more we may be resistant to such changes becoming manifest in our stu-

dents' texts: "Many happily proclaim that there is no truth, no right answer, no right interpretation; many say they want more voices in the academy, dialogue, heteroglossia! But they won't let themselves or their students write in a language tainted with the ordinary or with the presence and feelings of the writer" (11). Thomas Newkirk makes a similar point, even more forcefully: "Paradoxically, leftist cultural studies, which rests on postmodern theories, has been very conservative in the formal options it offers students. We see very little of the irreverence, play, improvisation, and humor so evident in postmodern writing. In fact, we see little student writing at all in many of these descriptions; students are virtually absent in Berlin's final book, *Rhetoric, Poetics, and Cultures* (1996)" (96).

Students rarely experience nonfiction as the "enjoyable" genre that Wendell Harris had imagined they should. Students regularly attempt to speak not out of their time and place but as if they were someone else. In fact, in our own schooling, many of us felt the same way. Referring to his own early training, Douglas Atkins observes: "We wrote 'essays' as if they were 'compositions,' entities that smack of the artificial and the mechanical, whose parts might be simply *assembled*, like those of a small engine" (630). Given that generations have felt this way about the "essay" in "composition," it is not surprising that "creative nonfiction" presents itself as a more seductive term. And even then, this sexier vision has not fared well in our classes: "Personal writing' has existed mainly as a mode vs. as a genre, rather as a vehicle toward better writing than as a destination genre for students treated as serious writers" (Hesse, "Who Owns" 256).

Explaining her own writing education, Nancy Welch discusses the way her academic advisor urged her to take a fiction workshop in order to disrupt Welch's academic writing, which "was a seamless, predictable little package that neatly excised any potential disruption" She feels that her advisor was in this way trying to offer her broader genre knowledge: "Maybe she saw that my understanding of expository and argumentative prose needed the 'sideshadows' of fiction or poetry" (120). Sideshadowing is a term Welch borrows from literary theorist Gary Saul Morson, a Bakhtin scholar. Not foreshadowing, but sideshadowing. Instead of assuming a set future, in sideshadowing we ask the opposite: What are possible futures? Options? Challenges? Opportunities? We ask, How else might it be on the road(s) traveled by creative nonfiction and composition?



Because the creative writer's version of creative nonfiction is undertheorized, borrowing pedagogy from the fiction and poetry workshop, eschewing the taint of required composition pedagogy (and, therefore, unfortunately, the possibilities of rhetoric), it remains bound up in an elitist literary aesthetics. Practitioners contribute a wealth of texts to enjoy and respond to but supply scant theory and practice for our classrooms. That is, there are any number of engaging nonfiction writers whose

writings I could point to as worthy of discussion and emulation. There is a publishing industry seemingly eager to continue producing these texts. However, there is not a strong textbook tradition or institutional culture focused on the teaching of creative nonfiction. This, to me, suggests an opportunity for those in composition to join with those in creative nonfiction to develop a new and generous pedagogy for the genre. Together, we can better ask, How else might it be?

This will certainly require that we change as teachers. We need to get serious about creating new, fused pedagogies, ones that include rhetoric, composition, creative writing, and literature as partners in instruction. We particularly need these for *undergraduate* essayists. We must understand that “creative” is already in the composition classroom. And finally, in order to write well, for us and with us, students have to believe that *we believe* they can succeed.

When allowed to explore literary nonfiction—essay, memoir, personal journalism, and the other literatures of fact—our writing students will develop a substantial set of strengths from which to undertake other disciplinary writing challenges as they explore past and present with an eye to the future. Stuart Ching argues that “memory’s function is both recuperative and generative. Memory enables cultural retrieval, but at the moment of retrieval, that which has been retrieved is already changing into a new discourse—a new story, as it were—which, in turn, reshapes and repositions the individual in the present” (58–59). To encourage students to meet themselves in their writing is to teach generously, to open up options, to begin discussions, to allow the old to interact with the new. Arguing for a pedagogy of charity, Kevin J. Porter presents his foundational conviction: “Students are rational beings with mostly true and coherent beliefs. I’ve tried to ‘read’ my students charitably,” he says, “and I’ve tried to encourage them to ‘read’ me and each other charitably as well because I’m convinced that charitable readers are more productive than severe readers because they are capable of transforming not only writers but also themselves” (598–99).

I believe the recent and continuing discussions taking place between composition and creative writing at, on, and about these issues have the possibility of infusing our classrooms with needed energy and offer a chance for teachers and students, together, to sideshadow the future in a manner that will allow them to discover what they don’t yet know, to clarify what they don’t yet understand, to preserve what they value, and to share their discoveries with others while writing essays that matter.



Coda: My daughter is completing her first AP English essay on the assigned topic of “an event which taught her a lesson.” In choosing to write about her final car crash, she paralleled my own investigation here. Through eleventh grade, she remained unengaged as a writer, resistant to writing nearly to the same degree that I am involved with it. Her fall-term senior-year teacher seems poised to make a difference

because she is excited about the course and appears (from my daughter's reports) to be speaking to the students as able young adults. Using an anthology of student essays from previous classes that my daughter says she enjoys, using familiar assignments that range from personal experience to persuasion to exam preparation, this teacher has convinced my daughter to try drafting, and redrafting.

I'm struck by the change in Morgan as she writes about a topic she cares about passionately. When she explains that her favorite sentence in her essay is "I walked away from my car in confusion and saw my freedom crushed on the ground along with my tinted window," I refrain from telling her that I've heard sentences like this before or that she might want to expand on her bail-out final paragraph, where the trauma of her car crash is turned into a precise and palatable nugget of learning. I resist those subtractive impulses and encourage her instead to write more, to re-draft, to continue to dig into the essay, to enjoy the words of her world. Without belief and charity, without the chance to examine her own life, without the prospect of reading writers of her own time and place in addition to writers of other times and places, she will not have the opportunity to become an ethnographer of experience, investigating whether and how her car crash has made all the difference.

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